DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 119 036 CG 008 419

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TITLE High School and Junior High School Drug Users and Non-Users: A Comparison of Personality Traits and Perceptions of Parental Attitudes and Practices.
PUB DATE [73]
NOTE 18p.; Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Comparative Analysis; *Drug Abuse; High School Students; Individual Characteristics; Junior High School Students; Marihuana; *Parent Child Relationship; *Personality Assessment; Psychological Studies; Secondary Education; *Suburban Youth

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine whether the characteristics correlated with drug use and nonuse among older adolescents would be true for younger people. A sample of 6,405 students, representing 89 percent of all pupils enrolled in grades 7-12 in a suburban school district, completed a classroom-administered questionnaire. The report deals with the student's assessments of their perceptions of the parent-child relationship. The data on these dimensions are discussed in relation to sex, age, and drug-use patterns. The results generally indicate that nonusers tend to view themselves and their relationships with their parents in more favorable terms than do the current drug users. Nonusers make up the greater portion of the student population (58 percent nonusers versus 21 percent current users). These findings parallel those found for college students. (SJL)

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ED119036

HIGH SCHOOL AND JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL DRUG USERS AND NON-USERS: A COMPARISON OF PERSONALITY TRAITS AND PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTAL ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

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The authors wish to thank Dr. John Sinacore, of the New York State Education Department, who made it possible to undertake this study and who, through the Department of Health and Physical Education, partially supported the study. Mr. Fred Winsor, of the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene, was responsible for program analysis. Mrs. Ann Drossman assisted with the statistical analysis.

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There have been a number of studies of drug use among students (Einstein and Allen, 1972). The majority have focused on those in college (Pearlman et al., 1972; Robbins et al., in press, 1970, 1970, 1973, 1973). Since many students have reported using drugs before entering college, it seemed advisable to study a junior high school and senior high school population in order to obtain data at the time drug use was first beginning, as well as to include in the base population the many students who do not go on to college. We were particularly interested in whether the characteristics which had been correlated with drug use and non-use among older adolescents would also be true for younger people.

We were fortunate in being able to obtain a census of an entire school district in a suburb north of New York City. Students were tested by means of a classroom-administered questionnaire in October 1971, and again in April 1973. The present paper will report on several aspects of the earlier survey.*

Responses were obtained from 96% of the students present at the time the questionnaire was administered. This represents 89% of all pupils enrolled in grades seven through twelve. The final sample consists of 6406 students.

Steps were taken to ensure anonymity by omitting identifying information and by requesting that each completed questionnaire

* Copies of the questionnaire may be obtained from the senior author.

be returned in a sealed envelope (Robbins et al., 1973). All coding and preparation for computer analysis were done at another location to further ensure confidentiality of responses.

The present report will deal with two aspects: The students' assessments of their personality, and their perceptions of the parent-child relationship.

Data will be presented by sex, age (grades 7 - 9 versus grades 10 - 12), and drug-use patterns. With regard to the last category, the sample was divided into five sub-groups:

1. Non-Users

   This is the largest group, particularly for junior high school students, comprising 3745 pupils, or 58% of the sample. These students reported no experience with any of the listed medicinal or illicit substances.

A second group, users of medicinal or legal substances, primarily used prescribed medication. This group was further subdivided into those reporting:

2. Use of analgesics (aspirin-like substances only) (N = 786 or 12% of sample), and
3. Use of tranquilizers, amphetamines, barbiturates, or anti-depressants (N = 355 or 6% of sample).

Students were classified as users of illicit drugs if they reported using, on at least one occasion, marijuana, LSD, other hallucinogens, cocaine, heroin or methadone. This group was further split into:

4. Past Users

These students reported discontinuing the use of illicit drugs by the time of the survey (N = 170 or 3% of sample). They had been, for the most part, occasionally, rather than seriously, involved.

5. Current Users

These students reported that they still were using at least one illicit substance (N = 1349 or 21% of the sample). If use was restricted to one drug, it was virtually always marijuana. For the present report, no distinctions have been made between students using illicit drugs on a casual, or frequent, basis.

This presentation will focus on results for the group as a whole, and on comparisons between the two largest groups: current users and non-users.

Personality Self-Ratings

Students were asked to describe themselves in terms of whether a list of 40 adjectives, each included in an explanatory

sentence, was "usually," "sometimes" or "never" typical of their behavior. For example, "I am calm and don't get too excited"; "I am disgusted at the way my life is going"; "I try to be honest and good. I am ethical"; "I do my thing. I am an individualist"; "I am against the establishment. I am rebellious"; "I am responsible and can be trusted"; and "I'm no good. I am worthless."

The same words tended to be selected with the greatest and least frequency by all groups of students, who described themselves as usually friendly, happy, responsible and angry, and as typically never feeling isolated, hopeless, helpless or worthless. Table 1 presents the traits selected by more than half of the non-users and current users. Differences between the two groups were slight (less than 5%) for the following words: never worthless or isolated, and usually angry and friendly.

More sizable differences (from 8.0% to 19.9%) were found for the following traits: never hopeless or helpless, and usually responsible and happy, with the non-users rating themselves more positively than current users. Several words were selected by more than half the non-users, but not by as great a proportion of the current users. These included: usually practical and confident, and never lonely, cynical, worried or disgusted with life. The greater degree of agreement among the

non-users might lend some weight to their tendency to think of themselves as less individualistic than the current users. Only one word -- ambitious -- was chosen by the majority of current users and by less than 50% of the non-users. This may reflect the higher socio-economic status of many of the users, whose parents frequently are professionals who place great emphasis upon academic achievement.

Differences in terms of age were marked for only three items: High school males were more likely to portray themselves as usually informed and practical than junior high school males or females, and more likely to report themselves as being responsible than junior high school males. The latter were far more likely to report themselves as usually restless and unable to sit still, a self-assessment with much face validity!

As far as sex differences are concerned, the following items seemed to be of greatest importance: Females described themselves more often than males as usually confident, ethical and responsible. The last difference was particularly marked for the younger respondents. Girls were also significantly more likely to describe themselves as never cynical. Males were more likely than females to report themselves as usually contented, informed and practical. Boys were also more likely than girls to feel that

they were never helpless or lonely and less likely to regard themselves as chronic worriers.

Traits with the greatest differences between the drug-use groups are shown in Table 2. The non-users are significantly less likely to report feeling rebellious, restless, disgusted with life, individualistic, moody or impulsive, and more likely to regard themselves as responsible, ethical and cheerful. Traits which showed smaller differences between the current users and non-users, though they were still statistically significant, indicated that the non-users feel more happy and practical and less stubborn, cynical, calm, helpless, hopeless, lonely, sad and worthless.

Differences between college students who were drug users and non-users paralleled these findings (Robbins et al., 1970). However, the data still do not permit us to conclude whether the students who feel more pessimistic about life and themselves therefore turn to drugs, or whether the drugs have some effect, either on students' outlook, or on the propensity to reveal negative characteristics about themselves.

Perceptions of Parents

While the students were critical of their parents in some areas, they generally saw them in positive terms (see Tables 3 and 4).

Nearly all felt loved and both loved and liked their parents in return. Most believed their parents were interested in them, were not hypocrites, and generally enjoyed life. A reasonable degree of parental accord was reported, with both parents usually seen as participating in the making of family decisions. Neither one was usually perceived as being subservient to the other. These generally positive perceptions should be stressed in view of the current emphasis on intergenerational discord and conflict.

However, there were some areas of unhappiness and criticism. A number of students stated that their beliefs and values were different from their parents, and that they did not wish to be like them. There was also a sizable group who felt misunderstood by their parents and believed that not enough time was spent with them. Over 40% of the respondents reported feeling angry at both parents. Differences between non-users and current users were marked, with the latter consistently expressing the more critical assessments (see Table 4). Thus, current users were far more likely to report that their parents did not spend enough time with them, that their parents did not usually make good decisions, that their parents did not understand them nor hold the same beliefs. Considerably more current users were angered by their parents. They were less likely to turn to their parents

for advice, to want to be like them or to report listening to them. With our large sample, all reported differences are highly significant. One could summarize these findings by stating that non-users tended to view their parents in more favorable terms than current users, and to describe greater identification and a closer relationship.

Few of the students (ranging from 9% to 16% depending on the drug-use group) felt that their parents were very strict. Current users were most likely to report having strict parents. The sample as a whole, particularly the older students, also reported not being afraid of their parents. Again, the greatest percentage of admitted fear (which ranged from 4% to 9%) was for the current drug users. Girls tended to be more fearful than boys and junior high school students more fearful than high school students.

We can only speculate as to the reasons why so many of the students felt angry since, by and large, they were not afraid of their parents, nor did they feel overly restricted by them. Psychological factors, such as emerging feelings of autonomy and desire to be self-assertive and have a greater sense of independence may play a role, as well as reality factors, such as being restricted by lack of funds, parental rules and the bounds created by society.

Most of the students came from intact families and perceived their parents as presenting a united front. There were only a few instances where relatively large numbers of students reported different perceptions of mothers and fathers. Thus, 17% to 24% of the sample, depending on the particular drug use group, felt that their father worked too hard, while their mother did not; 9% to 20% reported that their father frightened them, while their mother did not; 11% to 16% of the sample reported that their father, rather than both parents, made family decisions; and 7% to 15% felt that their mother listened to them, while their father did not. These differences between perceptions of mothers and fathers were particularly marked in the current drug-use group.

Discussion

Differences between current users and non-users of drugs have been found with regard to self-reports of personality and perceptions of parents. Generally, the non-users tended to view themselves and their relationship with their parents in more favorable terms than did the current users. In view of their preponderance in the present population (58% non-users versus 21% current users), these generally favorable attitudes are important, since the media tend to give disproportionate coverage to the small proportion of drug users and the still smaller group among them who

use drugs to excess. As we have noted above, it is not possible to ascertain from data such as ours whether drug use preceded or followed the negative self-assessments, and to what extent the greater likelihood of discord with parents is a consequence of drug use or a precipitant.

While over-all differences between the groups of non-users and current users exist, it should be emphasized that not all current users are rebellious or unhappy, and that a substantial number report having good rapport with their parents, while some non-users report feeling worthless and unhappy and have considerable conflict with their parents. It is conceivable that more detailed analysis of the data will confirm our hypothesis that it is the casual drug user who sees himself more positively than the more serious drug user. It may also be possible, though the anonymity of the data makes this enormously difficult, to determine which non-users in the first survey have become drug users by the time of the second. We would speculate that those who switch might predominantly be recruited from the ranks of the already disaffected.

As a final point, it should be mentioned that the present data were obtained from the adolescents themselves. It is entirely possible that their parents might disagree about the nature of their relationship, or that parents, teachers and other adults

might disagree as to their assessments of personality. The agreements and differences between such independent assessments would make fascinating subjects for study. However, regardless of the validity of the students' perceptions, they seem to us to be of great importance since we have every reason to believe that they have expressed their beliefs about themselves and their parents with sincerity and candor.

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TABLE 1

TRAITS CHOSEN BY MORE THAN 50% OF

NON-USERS AND CURRENT USERS

	Non-Users (N = 3664)		Current Users (N = 1322)	
Trait	Usually (%)	Never (%)	Usually (%)	Never (%)
WORTHLESS		81.1		71.8
ISOLATED		78.6		77.2
RESPONSIBLE	73.6		53.7	
FRIENDLY	72.5		70.8	
HAPPY	67.3		59.3	
HOPELESS		63.0		54.9
HELPLESS		62.1		53.1
ANGRY	60.6		56.1	
AMBITIOUS			57.4	
LONELY		55.5		
CYNICAL		55.0		
PRACTICAL	50.9			
CONFIDENT	50.6			
WORRIER		50.6		
DISGUSTED		50.4		

TABLE 3

MINOR DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS

REPORTED BY NON-USERS AND CURRENT USERS

Perception of Both Parents	NU (%)	CU (%)	% Difference
INTERESTED IN child	93	84	+9
CHILD LIKES both	93	84	+9
Both MAKE FAMILY DECISIONS	77	70	+7
Both WORK TOO HARD	50	44	+6
Both LOVE CHILD	96	91	+5
Both SAY YES TOO MUCH	4	5	-1
Both SPOIL child	11	14	-3
Both NOT VERY EASY	51	55	-4
NO TIME SPENT with child	6	13	-7
Both VERY STRICT	9	16	-7

TABLE 4

MAJOR DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS

REPORTED BY NON-USERS AND CURRENT USERS

Perception of Both Parents	NU (%)	CU (%)	% Difference
WISH TO BE LIKE parents	59	30	+29
Can TURN TO for ADVICE	73	46	+27
Parents UNDERSTAND child	55	29	+26
SAME BELIEFS	45	19	+26
Parents DO NOT ANGER	51	28	+23
CHILD LISTENS to parents	90	68	+22
Parents SPEND TIME with child	66	45	+21
Parents make GOOD DECISIONS	84	65	+19
Parents FAIR	84	67	+17
Parents NOT PHONY	90	74	+16
Parents CONFIDE IN CHILD	61	45	+16
Parents DO NOT FRIGHTEN	83	69	+14
Parents ENJOY LIFE	89	76	+13
Parents NOT VERY STRICT	78	66	+12
CHILD LOVES parents	95	84	+11
Parents SAY NO TOO MUCH	13	26	-13